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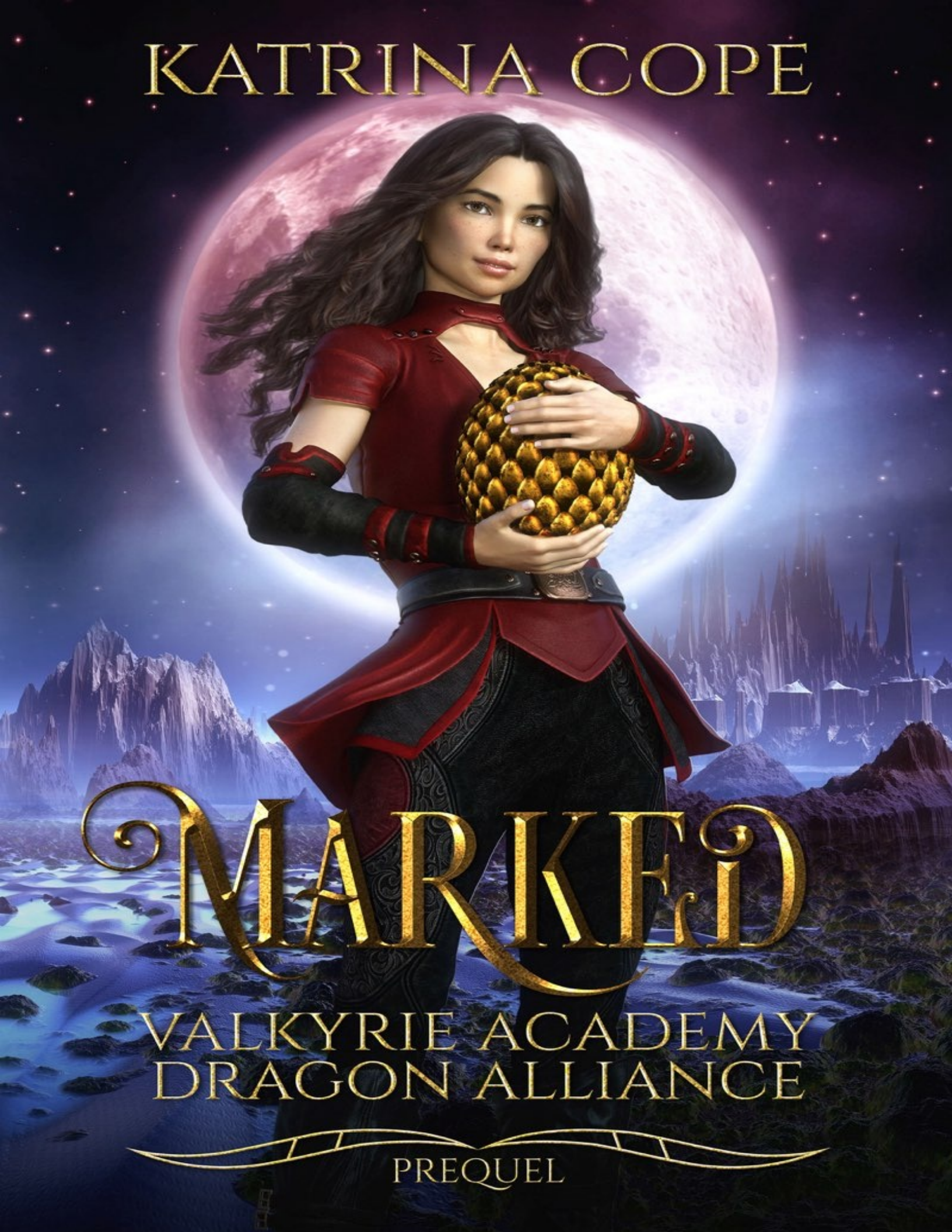

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DRAGON ALLIANCE

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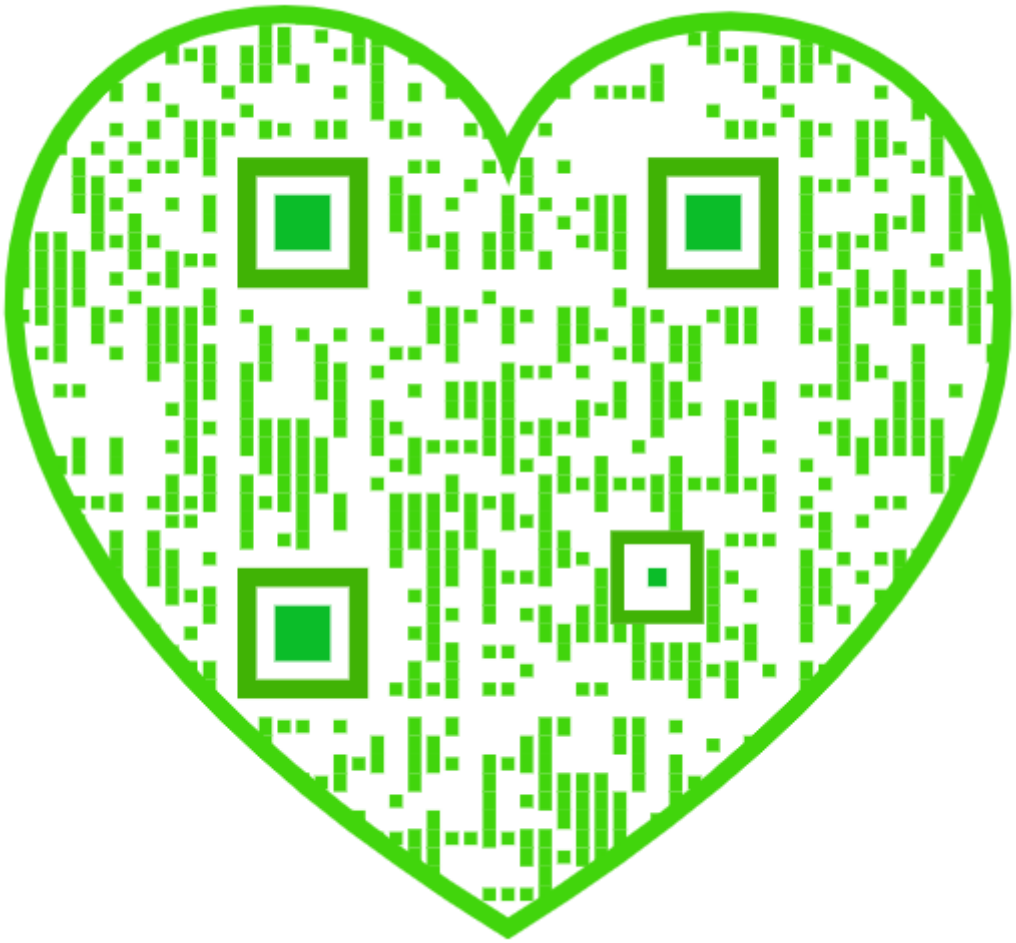

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CHAPTER ONE

My feet collide with something hard, and I feel myself falling. A thousand thoughts of how I ended up in this predicament run through my mind before my body slams onto the hard floor. A grunt of pain escapes my mouth as my arms flail, and my books scatter in front of me. Hurried footsteps pass as people scramble to leave the hall, and sniggers bounce off the hard academy walls, assaulting my ears. Before I gather the strength to turn around and look up, I know what happened.

"Oh, Vanir! Wingless, did you trip on your clumsy feet again?" Disdain taints the voice.

I roll over, push my long dark hair away from my face, and look up. Rota towers above me, framed by her beautiful pure-white wings.

"My name is Kara, not Wingless." My words are snappy as I glare at my archenemy, proven over the last few months from my first day at Valkyrie Academy.

She stands with her hands on her tiny hips, which are barely concealed in skintight blue leather pants. Her lustrous blond hair falls in waves down to her shoulders, tumbling over her unzipped tan leather jacket, which exposes her white, low-cut V-neck T-shirt. She looks amazing for her sixteen years of age, and I'm sure she knows it. Her blue eyes shoot daggers through her glare.

When she crosses her arms across her chest, her two winged companions, Mist and Prima, follow suit. The three of them standing together almost look like they were cut from the same mold and had decided to dress in the same clothes.

In reality, it was the uniform of the winged warriors. Small beads of sweat pooled on their shirts right under their heart. It looked as though they had just come from combat training.

Jealousy roars through me as I gaze at those beautiful white wings. I am only too aware of my lack of wings protruding from my shoulder blades. So many days, I curse the day I was born without wings. My fifteen years of life would have been entirely different if I were born with wings.

Rota glances over my scattered books, and something catches her eye. I cringe. Instantly, I know what it is. I scramble to my knees and dive for my books, trying desperately to gather them quickly together. A click of a heel sounds near my ear, and I grimace. I'm too late.

"What do we have here?" Rota stoops down and picks up the book lying just out of my reach. "*The Tale of How Brynhildr Got Her Wings.*" Malice colors her voice, and sniggers sound behind me. Some more winged Valkyries from the academy have gathered around.

I force my eyes to rise, traveling up her body and connecting with her eyes, only to be met by stones. She turns the pages, and I watch her hard face as she scans the contents.

After a few moments of only the rustling of pages slicing through the silence as she flicks through the book, her piercing eyes focus on me. "Oh, poor Wingless." Her voice holds no sympathy. "You know this is just a tale, don't you? A myth and make-believe story." I don't know how, but her face turns colder. "This is not possible. No matter how much you read the story, you will never grow wings. You will never be as magnificent as I or my friends." Her gaze flicks to her sneering companions. "You will always be a scavenger on the ground as we fly the skies, swooping down and picking out the greatest warriors, and sending them to Valhalla. You will remain as our slaves and our servants, scrounging through the corpses that we have left behind and cleaning up behind us. You will never be known for the glory of building the army for Ragnarok."

Her words cut deep, yet I pull from deep within and plaster on a brave face. I scramble to my feet, scooping up my books before yanking the book out of her grasp and hugging it to my chest.

Her face is a picture of beauty distorted by a thin-mouthed smile that edges toward a sneer. “Not all Valkyries can be born from the pure blood of the direct line of Odin’s creation. And because of this, you will never have wings.” Her sneer creeps higher. “Now, why don’t you run along and clean out the dragon stables.” She flicks her hands at me in a dismissive gesture.

Clasping my arms tighter around my books, I use the rest of my willpower to retain my tears that are creeping closer to the edge of my eyes. I must not show her how much she has upset me, or she will never stop.

Holding my back straight and my head high, I turn and walk down the pale-tiled hallway and out the door. It’s challenging, yet somehow, I pull it off. Her words cut deep. I know they are true, but I always hold on to hope that I can be part of the elite squad of Valkyries. I long to be more than a bottom cleaner and a dragon-stall cleaner.

When I know that I have left her sight, I run to my dormitory. I throw my books down on the bed and run out the door to the gates of the academy. Tears blur my vision when I pass through its gate. Though I know I shouldn’t let her get to me like this, I can’t help it. I desperately want to be so much more than this.

A winged Valkyrie from one of the patrol groups flies ahead, swooping low over me, then rises high again, heading for the sky as though I were insignificant and not worth the time. She flaps her wings, moving higher, toward the sun. I start to run, and I bolt as far away as I can. Though her wings are glorious and magnificent, I don’t want to see them. I need to get away and clear my head.

I run until I can no longer breathe, and my surroundings evolve to become drier and more desolate. Trying to impress the Valkyrie leaders and get their attention, I have been training hard so they will focus on me and give me something better than what the wingless Valkyries must do. Many of my friends have mocked me for my hope, but I can’t give up. It is harder for me to face the future of being a bottom dweller and being a wingless Valkyrie than for me to give up hope.

I expel my final breath, halt my running and slump over, gasping. Blocking out all sounds except the thrumming in my ears, my heart thumps profusely, and

my lungs burn. My vision is blurred as I stare at the dry, hard ground. It takes several minutes before the thumping subsides in my ears, and I hear a noise. I glance up. Before me is a hideous flying beast.

CHAPTER TWO

I dart behind the nearest boulder then squat and peek around the side. The winged creature isn't quite as big as I am but enough to be frightening. Bat-like membranous wings the color of dirty cream protrude from a round dark-furred body and flap steadily. It flaps and hovers an inch above something on the ground. I gaze down, and I'm shocked to see what is beneath. In a small little circle underneath the creature's claws lie three golden dragon eggs glistening in the sun.

Though I didn't realize I had traveled so far, somehow, I have reached the wildlands of the dragons–dangerous territory. I shouldn't be out here. Any dragons out here are wild, untamed, and free to attack at any moment. The dragons that we have within the confines of the academy's walls are secured with chains–often used as slaves for the winged Valkyries to practice their fighting with. Even so, the wild dragons are revered, especially the golden one, which is the fiercest of them all.

I quickly search the area, and I can't see any sign of dragons. These mesmerizing eggs must belong to one of the emperor dragons, which are the elite dragon species and highly dangerous and never tamed or kept at the academy, as they are too wild and strong-minded to control, and they are ranked at the top of the hierarchy of dragons. Their size is alarming, and their beauty great, not to mention their natural weapons. Large claws extend from their paws, matched by long horns and spikes on the edges of their wings. All are designed to inflict an enormous amount of damage, and the plumes of fire they breathe are

more powerful than any other dragon's.

This winged creature's beady eyes dart rapidly across the wilderness, seemly searching the area. It dives to the ground and clasps its claws around one of the eggs. I freeze in terror as I realize that it is about to take one of the eggs. I have great respect for these golden dragons, and they are a rare breed—I don't want to see them become extinct.

I am uncertain what this creature's intentions are. Maybe it is hungry, or maybe it is grabbing it for another reason. I have heard that there is a black market for dragon eggs. It is believed that, if eaten, the eggs will give the warriors greater strength to use in battle. Other rumors say that the dragons can be raised as soldiers for a secret army. With this particular breed, I wish people luck in trying to tame them. Whatever the reason this creature has to be stealing the egg, I am not going to let it happen on my watch.

Searching the rugged terrain for the perfect-sized rock, I grope around my waist for my sling. My shaking fingers find the rough material woven from durable fibers, and I unhook it from the back of my pants. I spot a rock within reach, scoop it up, and slide it into my sling. While I take a deep breath, I twirl it around my head a couple of times, and I let it fly, aiming straight for the creature. The rock slams into the side of its body, and a crack faintly reaches my ears. The creature cries out, showing off the many teeth lining the inside of its long jaw. I scramble for another rock and sling it toward the creature, trying to hit it in a more significant place, but the rock misses, narrowly skimming the creature's fur as it flies past, and I curse my lack of experience. It is only my first year at Valkyrie Academy, and I have not yet perfected my swing.

My body tenses, and my heart skips a beat as the creature looks up, searching for where the rocks have come from. Its beady eyes land on me then narrow. My neck stiffens in fear. I am certain that it is about to come after me. Instead, the creature drops down again, gropes for the egg, and grasps it in its claws before flapping its enormous wings and taking to the sky.

I scan the ground again, hoping to find more rocks, and exhale loudly with excitement when I spot some more. I slide them one by one into my sling and hit the creature. It squawks loudly when one hits it on the wing, and the second one

collides with its leg. As it connects, a sickening crack, much louder than before, reaches my ears. The creature cries out again, and I silently congratulate myself that the hours of practice have paid off.

The creature drops the egg, and I clench my teeth as I watch it fall to the hard ground. It is only a short distance, but I hope that it isn't so far that the egg would crack open before the baby is ready to come.

I run at the creature, scooping up more rocks while watching as it flaps its enormous wings. The creature's eyes narrow, and it aims directly for me, even though the rocks I am slinging are hitting the target. Even the struggle with its injured wing doesn't stop it from coming toward me and swooping down. I duck away from its grasp, yet the long claws wrap around my upper arm and over my shoulder and clasp me firmly. My feet lift off the ground as we ascend.

Pulling my strength from my torso, I swing my feet up and kick the creature in its belly right where I hit it with the rock the first time. It cries out and drops me but not without scraping its claws farther along my arm and drawing blood. After I land hard on my side, an intense pain shoots to my hip. I refuse to let this deter me, and I search the ground for more rocks and fire them at the creature.

It turns and takes to the sky, causing my heart to soar as it leaves me on the ground.

When I am confident that it will not return, I clip my sling on the back of my pants and glance over at the three eggs. My breath catches in my throat when I see one is slowly rolling down the hill toward a cliff. I break into a run, hoping that I will be fast enough to get to the egg before it tumbles over the side. Its momentum increases, and it rolls faster. I dig my toes into the hard ground and sprint.

With only seconds until it reaches the edge, I dive, reaching as far as I can, trying to block the egg's path before it falls. I land hard on the solid ground and grunt in pain as I scrape my arm all the way up the side, and a jagged rock jabs into my ribs. That will definitely cause a bruise.

I wrap my arms around the egg and hug it close. It is surprising how warm it is. Dragons' eggs are usually warm, but this burns from the rays of the sun, which give it the much-needed heat when the mother is away. I hold it close,

drawing comfort from the heat. As much as I hate the duty of cleaning out the dragon pens at the academy, I am always mesmerized by the creatures and enjoy the time that I spend with them. It is during this time that I can study them and their different breeds.

As I hold the egg, I stare down at the beautiful gold color and wonder what it would be like to study this dragon up close and take in the different features from a real perspective rather than a book.

I stroke the egg softly and whisper, “It’s okay, little baby. I got you. May you grow into a big, strong dragon. I don’t know where your mommy is or why she isn’t here to protect you. But don’t worry. I’ll protect you.”

I stroke the egg some more, and a tingling feeling shoots up my arm. When I wriggle my fingers, I realize my arm is bleeding. It must be from the injury caused by the creature, and I hope it isn’t infected. I stroke the egg one more time, marveling at the golden glint under the sun. “I shall take you back to your nest with the eggs of your siblings, then I must go.”

Holding it tight, I walk in the direction of the nest. I glance up to watch where I’m going and stop short. Before me, standing over her remaining eggs, is a large golden dragon–the emperor dragon–and I can tell by the fiery glint in her eyes that she is the mother.

CHAPTER THREE

I don’t like the way she looks at me. It makes me feel like her next meal, and I don’t know what to do. Her fiery gaze boils my fear to the surface, and I know I have to move now. I glance at the two eggs underneath her then at the golden egg. My legs start to shake. I badly want to place the egg back where it belongs, but I don’t want to step any closer to this mother dragon. She has the look of protection in her eyes as though she is about to swoop down and kill me.

Holding the egg firmly in my outstretched arms, I attempt to edge forward, hoping she understands that I want to return the egg, but my feet won’t move. They are frozen in place, with the quivering turning my legs to jelly.

Dropping to my knees, I lower my gaze, slowly pushing the egg farther toward her while stretching my arms as far as they will go. Then, ever so slowly, I let my eyes creep up to look at the mother. I don’t know if the mother will see this as a submissive gesture or not. I am definitely offering her egg back to her.

“Please, take it back.” It takes all of my strength to keep my voice calm and even. “I was only trying to protect the egg. The only reason your egg is in my hands is because I was stopping the creature from stealing it, then I had to save it from rolling off the cliff. I’m not trying to take your egg.”

I have no idea if this wild dragon can understand me, but at this stage, anything is worth a try. The dragon flings her head back and snorts out a large plume of smoke. For a second, the air in front of me is cloudy with its haze. Eventually, the smoke clears, revealing her piercing golden-brown eyes first.

If she understands me, I don’t know if she believes me. It doesn’t matter. I

have no choice. I'm about to lower the egg to the ground and see if I can turn and run, trying out my chances of escaping in one piece. Even so, the niggling voice deep down is still screaming that I am a fool to think I can get away. But I must try.

The egg starts to inch toward me when I feel the ground rumble beneath me after a thump. The dragon has landed not far from me. She towers over me and gazes down. I don't know if I'm about to lose my head, and now my arms are starting to shake as well.

"I-I promise. I-I was only protecting your egg," I stutter, trying to stop my arms from shaking so much before I drop the egg. Slowly, I lower my arms and place the egg on the ground in front of the dragon, tilting my head respectfully. "Please, don't kill me."

Answered by silence, I start to back away, only to be startled when a voice booms through my head.

You should not be here, Valkyrie.

I look around for the person who was talking to me, but no one is in sight. It is a strange feeling. I am certain that it was in my head, but I have never had this experience before–my ears are deaf to the sound, and it echoes through the corners of my brain.

It is no use looking around, Valkyrie. It is I who speaks to you.

I look up, and my eyes meet hers, which are gold and piercing.

The dragon nods in acknowledgement. *Yes, I am the one who is speaking to you.*

A strange combination of emotions is running through those eyes. They are not quite as piercing as I first thought, but I am still uncomfortable in their presence.

Normally, I would kill you for being near my eggs. But I saw what you did. And I will spare you this time.

Something makes a cracking noise, and I look down. The egg has a large split down the middle. I gasp. "Oh Vanir! Did it get broken?"

The dragon shuffles forward and stands over the egg. *The shell was damaged, yes, but the hatchling is about to come. Now go. Never before have I*

been indebted to a Valkyrie or any other being, and I do not like it. So go, before I change my mind.

I don't need reminding—I nod and back away. The second I feel I am far enough away, I turn my back and run.

THE END

CHOSEN: Book 1 of the completed series, Valkyrie Academy Dragon Alliance, is released.

You can find more of Katrina Cope's books here:

KATRINA COPE'S BOOKS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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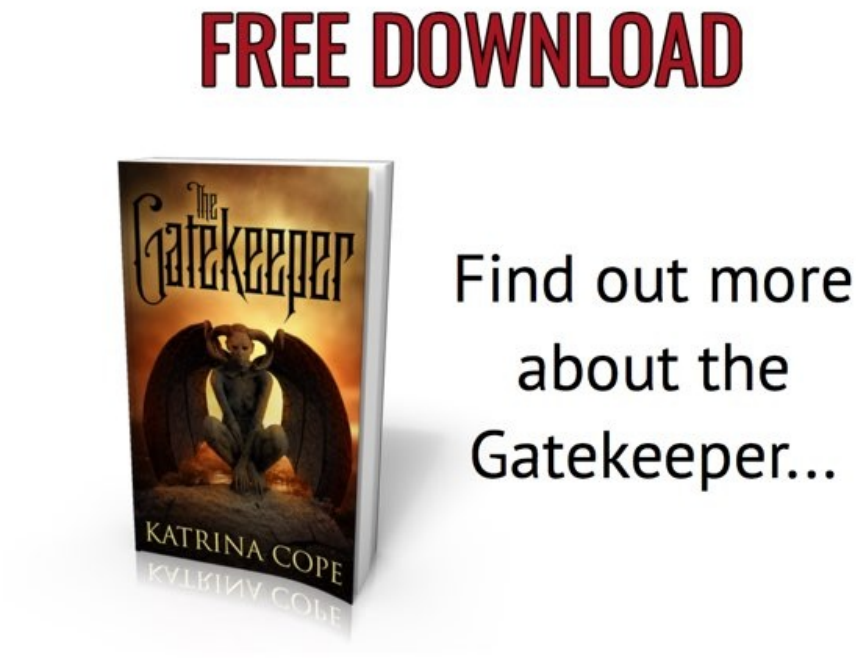
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katrina is an author of several Young Adult and Preteen/Middle Grade novels. Each of her released books reaching the top 100 in certain categories on the Amazon's Best Sellers Rank – a few even as high as number one.

She resides in Queensland, Australia. Her three teenage boys and husband for over nineteen years treat her like a princess. Unfortunately though, this princess still has to do domestic chores.

From a very young age, she has been a very creative person and has spent many years travelling the world and observing many different personalities and cultures. Her favourite personalities have been the strange ones, yet the ones under the radar also hold a place in her heart.

During her last extensive travels, she spent 16 nights in a bomb shelter on a Kibbutz 8 kilometers off the Lebanese border. It was to avoid Katyusha bombs that the resident volunteers decided to name her after (she is still trying to work out why).

Katrina's online home is at www.katrinacopebooks.com

You can connect with Katrina on: